

Globe and Mail Thursday Apr 8, 1999

Shop around for on-line store solution

Every entrepreneur must appreciate that electronic business is not optional — it's a competitive necessity.

As the world economy becomes increasingly wired together through the Internet, every business, regardless of its size, will find it necessary during the next few years to implement intricate computer and networking technologies.

Suppliers and customers will set up sophisticated procurement networks — and you will have to be part of them. Reduced profit margins will force you to gain on-line commerce capabilities in order to stay competitive. Global competition will require that you implement effective, technology-based customer support tools.

Yet if you are like many entrepreneurs, you will make decisions about these technologies in a vacuum, without the necessary knowledge. The result is a lot of bad choices and wasted money.

Peter Keen, in his seminal work *Competing in Time*, wrote that creating an organizational strategy for telecommunications requires a new style of business thinking among senior managers, who must also



E-BIZ

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have some insights into key aspects of the technology itself. Substitute the word telecommunications with electronic commerce, and you've got a strong statement to guide you.

As a small-business operator, you may be wondering what's involved in setting up your own on-line store. Before you listen to the many companies pitching an E-commerce solution, you should understand the range and complexity of choices that you will have to make.

Should you have someone build a site on your behalf, hosted on your own computer system? Or should you simply rent space on one of the many emerging E-commerce sites available? What is the difference between the two approaches in terms of cost, complexity, support, flexibility and your appearance to the outside world?

Only by exploring E-commerce technology directly can you begin to gain insight into such issues. To do so, you should visit a number of Web sites that let you create a store for a trial period, and then cancel without penalty. There are quite a few offerings to try out, such as those from Icat (www.icat.com), GeoCities (www.geocities.com/join/geoshops), SunCommerce (www.suncommerce.com), Yahoo (store.yahoo.com) and others.

Next, talk to other entrepreneurs who have created a store using their own computer systems. By comparing the two approaches and assessing what you have learned, you'll end up making a better decision as to your own needs.

Spend time exploring the technology involved. To meet my goal of constantly trying out new technology, I often set aside Friday afternoons as play time. It is an important research and development process that helps me to make intelligent technology decisions.

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